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ABSTRACT

A study examined the effects on political socialization of students in grades 5-6, based on teachers' use of local newspapers in classrooms throughout Argentina (except in Buenos Aires) during the 1995 school year. The newspaper program was sponsored by the Association of Dailies of the Interior Region of Argentina. Data were collected by self-administered questionnaires filled out by students, to measure educational outcomes, and by teachers, regarding teaching methods, throughout the country. To provide a control group, each cooperating teacher chose a second teacher in the same grade level and school who was not using the newspaper. Results indicated that use of the newspaper in the classroom significantly and positively affected students' political knowledge, democratic norms, and communication behaviors. Strong effects were found on tolerance, support for democracy, the formation of political opinions, and on communication behaviors such as discussing politics with family members and reading the newspaper at home. All of the outcomes were affected more strongly among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, except mass media use. Findings suggest that general approaches used in teaching included discussing current affairs and societal problems in class; writing assignments on controversial public issues; and improving media education, including discussion of the role of the press in society. (Contains 22 references.) (CR)

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Political Socialization via a Newspaper-in-Schools Program in Argentina: Effects of Variations in Teaching Methods

Final Report to the Spencer Foundation

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Political Socialization via a Newspaper-in-Schools Program in Argentina: Effects of Teaching Strategies

This study was undertaken as part of a larger evaluation of effects on political socialization of 5th and 6th grade students, based on teachers' use of local newspapers in their classrooms during the 1995 school year. The newspaper program, *El Diario en la Escuela*, was sponsored by the Association of Dailies of the Interior Region of Argentina (ADIRA), whose member newspapers provided free copies for local schools' use one day each week. Teachers' use of these local newspapers was voluntary, and the ways they employed them in class varied considerably. Effects of these variations in teaching methods associated with the newspaper constitute the main topic of this study.

Data were collected by self-administered questionnaires filled out by students and teachers throughout the country (except for the city of Buenos Aires). Each cooperating teacher was asked to complete a questionnaire on teaching methods and to have her students complete a questionnaire in which educational outcomes were measured. To provide a "control group" each cooperating teacher was also asked to get a second teacher in the same grade level and school, but who was not using the newspaper, to gather the same questionnaire data. This pairing of matched teachers and classes produced a quasi-experimental design to assess impact of the newspaper itself, and a correlational survey to evaluate effects of different teaching methods (N=3387

students; N=121 teachers). The Spencer Foundation grant supported coding of student and teacher questionnaires, and data analysis; other costs of the study had been supported by grants within Stanford University, and by ADIRA itself.

Background. Research on political socialization via classroom programs dates from the 1960s (Williams, 1961; Hess & Easton, 1962; Litt, 1963; Langton & Jennings, 1968). In general, results in the United States have been discouraging, researchers typically concluding either that curriculum innovations make no difference or that they affect only limited didactic outcomes such as learning of the particular information that was taught (Riccards, 1973; Patrick, 1977; Dennis, 1973; Ichilov, 1990). More general development of young people as citizens, as indicated by their use of news media, habits of discussing current politics, holding political opinions, and adherence to normative democratic assumptions such as tolerance for diversity, have been little affected by school curriculum innovations. Research on this subject has been sparse, largely due to early discouragement of scholars based on limited findings (Niemi & Hepburn, 1995).

In other countries, though, including some where democracy is new and considered relatively fragile, school curricula have at times been found to stimulate political socialization (e.g., Westholm, Linquist & Niemi, 1990). One such study was an evaluation of the ADIRA program by Morduchowicz, Catterberg, Niemi, and Bell (1994), who found significant effects of the

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newspaper program on students' political knowledge, democratic norms, and communication behaviors. This result encouraged us to add an evaluation of teaching methods to the newspaper vs. control group field experiment, in the present study.

Indicators of political socialization. Citizens need many capabilities to participate fully in democratic processes. Our student questionnaire cast a wide net, including items that we combined to form indices of students' mass media use, interpersonal discussion of politics (separate measures for family and friends), knowledge of current public affairs, opinion holding, expressed interest in voting and politics, support for democracy, and tolerance for diversity.

Experimental results. Use of the newspaper in the classroom was found, in comparison with students in the control classes, to have significantly and positively affected each of these dependent variables except the current events knowledge index (which consisted of four questions about events that were not necessarily covered in the issues of the newspapers the students were given in class). Strong effects were found on tolerance, support for democracy, and the formation of political opinions, and also on communication behaviors such as discussing politics with family members and reading the newspaper at home.

A second general result was that all of these outcomes except mass media use were affected more strongly among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (based on education and occupation of each parent). While this phenomenon is usually

referred to as closing the "knowledge gap" (Tichenor, Olien & Donohue, 1970), the gap-closing pattern was most marked for dependent variables of an attitudinal nature. The notably wide distance between social strata on our scale of political tolerance was cut approximately in half by the presence of the newspaper in the classroom once a week. This is an especially gratifying educational result in a country where one religion and one race predominate, and where the lower classes have traditionally been loyal to populist regimes that did not encourage democratic participation.

These very positive results in the quasi-experimental analysis provided a basis for further exploration of the role played by variations in the way the teachers taught in these classes, which is the component of this project supported by the grant from the Spencer Foundation.

Teaching methods. We distinguished, on the basis of several teacher questionnaire items each, four general approaches to teaching with the newspaper. Each of these was reported significantly more often by teachers using the newspaper in school than by teachers in the control condition. Simply using various parts of the newspaper to teach was one of these independent variables. The other three were discussing current affairs and societal problems in class; giving the students writing assignments on controversial public issues; and media education, which included discussion of the role of the press in society.

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Inevitably, these methods overlapped to some extent in a given teacher, creating correlations between the indices that prevent us from isolating any one from the others in multiple regression analysis. Our results are therefore based on correlations between each teacher's self-reported teaching methods and the mean scores of her students on the various indicators of political socialization, controlling for each student's family socioeconomic status. Due to missing data, N=2650 students and 112 matched teachers were represented in this combined analysis.

Variety of uses of the newspaper itself significantly predicted only three dependent variables: public affairs knowledge, reading of printed news media, and tolerance for political diversity.

Group discussion of societal problems significantly stimulated interpersonal discussion with the student's family, reading of print media, and interest in politics.

Writing assignments had a greater range of impacts, significantly predicting political interest, political knowledge, reading of news, normative support for democracy, and tolerance for diversity.

Media education was the most broadly stimulating of the teaching methods we evaluated. It accounted for significant increments of variance in political interest, knowledge, opinion holding, news reading, television news viewing, normative support for democracy, and several measures of interpersonal

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communication including discussion with friends as well as family.

Comparing the four teaching strategies, it appears that the most potent teaching methods were those which went beyond literal usage of the newspaper and attempted to integrate students into the world of communication through class discussion, writing assignments, or education about how the media function.

Summary and discussion. The ADIRA program appears clearly to stimulate political socialization in a classroom setting, but mere usage of the newspaper does not accomplish nearly as much as does innovative teaching that goes beyond what lies on the printed page. Our findings regarding class discussion are somewhat disappointing in light of prior literature suggesting that this learning method can foster attitude change (Miller & Biggs, 1958; Fisher, 1968) as well as comprehension and critical thinking (Hill, 1969; Herrick, 1991).

On the other hand, having students write about controverial issues in the newspaper had attitudinal effects that go well beyond the cognitive effects that are usually attributed to writing exercises (Doctorow, Wittrock & Marks, 1978; Taylor & Berkowitz, 1980; Squire, 1983; Stotsky, 1983). Given the strong effects of the newspaper's presence itself on values of tolerance and democracy, our discovery that writing exercises further stimulated acquisition of these norms is striking. In the course of creating a written argument a student may imagine a potential reader's perspective and engage in some vicarious debate; these

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experiences could foster a more open orientation to politics that manifests itself in our measures of democratic norms.

Education about news media is clearly another teaching strategy on which research is merited. This was, overall, the most powerful of the teaching devices we studied in connection with the newspaper in the classroom. While there is a great deal of prescriptive literature on teaching technical media skills, and on "media literacy" skills such as the deconstruction of texts (Bazalgette, Bevort & Savino, 1992), little research has linked any of this to processes of political socialization.

News media play an integral role in participative democracy, and are themselves important agencies of political socialization (Chaffee & Yang, 1990). While their political role is in some ways antagonistic, both to government and to certain class interests, an understanding of these relationships requires a student to develop a fairly sophisticated view of democracy as an ongoing process. An educational program built around but not limited to reading the local daily newspaper, can stimulate students to communicate further -- with one another, with their parents, and via media -- and to develop political understanding and opinions of their own. Research on this mode of instruction, including exploration of both civics teaching procedures and the political learning process beyond the classroom, is especially needed.

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